The big genre mystery – the mystery genre

Spiegel, Simon

Molloy, Tim (2012) Awake is the Best New Show of the Season. The Wrap. Online: [http://www.thewrap.com/tv/article/review-awake-best-new-show-season-35862]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Ndalianis, Angela (2009) Lost in Genre: Chasing the White Rabbit to Find a White Polar Bear. In: Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show. Ed. by Roberta Pearson. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 181–200.

Pappademas, Alex (2009) Geekdom's Council of Elders. GQ. Online: [http://www.gq.com/entertainment/movies-and-tv/200912/jj-abrams-flashforward-lost-star-trek/]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Pearson, Roberta (2011) Cult Television as Digital Television's Cutting Edge. In: Television as Digital Media. Ed. by James Bennett & Nikki Strange. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 105–131.

Pearson, Roberta (2007) Lost in Transition: From Post-network to Post-television. In: Quality: Contemporary American Television and Beyond. Ed. by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 239–256.

Seidman, Robert (2010). Updated: FlashForward's Ratings: Blame the Show, Not the Scheduling. TVbytheNumbers. Online: [tvbythenumbers.com]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Sutter, Greg (2010) Interview with Carlton Cuse. The Greg Sutter Website. Online: [http://greggsutter.com/wordpress/?p=515]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Waldman, Allison J. (2009) ABC: Lost. TV Week. Online: [http://www.tvweek.com/news/2009/05/abc_lost.php]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Simon Spiegel

The Big Genre Mystery: The Mystery Genre

There is a certain irony in the fact that I have to write this paper in English, since its subject matter is exclusively German: the mysterious genre called *mystery*. Most native English speakers will probably protest at this opening sentence since from their point of view there is absolutely nothing German about mystery; quite the contrary, mystery fiction is a venerable genre with a long and illustrious tradition. And isn't "mystery" an English term to begin with? Needless to say that though these objections are completely justified, they also miss the point. They do, however, help to illustrate a problem I have to deal with: mystery does not equal mystery. When we talk about novels, films or – in this particular case – TV series, mystery has a very different meaning depending on the language it is used in. The English mystery genre is by no means identical with the German one.

In English, "mystery", when used to label a certain kind of fiction, is commonly applied to detective and crime narratives. An English speaking person will typically think of stories in the tradition of Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie when they encounter the term. This specific meaning has quite a long tradition, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it dates back to the end of the 19th century (which is also the time when modern crime fiction was born). The German "mystery" on the other hand is much younger and although it is commonly used nowadays, its exact meaning is much less clear. In fact, there are only two paradigmatic examples for mystery which are largely undisputed; one of them is – of course – Lost.◂1 In the following pages I will try to describe this specific German flavor of mystery using Lost as my main object of analysis. As I hope to show, this enterprise is not an end in itself but rather sheds light on some of the most discussed aspects of the series.

The question of how a specific genre can be defined is inextricably linked with the concept of genre itself. In fact, most of the time when there is a disagreement on what constitutes a certain genre, the fundamental difference of opinion does not have its roots in the genre at hand but in the differing understandings of what we actually mean by genre. Therefore I will first sketch some of the main problems which have plagued genre theory since its beginnings in

the 1970s. Equipped with an understanding of how genres can be adequately theorized, I will move on to the main part: a historical and structural analysis of the (German) mystery genre as it is represented in LOST and some thoughts on the fascination with it.◂2

Generic Problems

In daily life we constantly use generic denominations when we talk about literature or films, but also when discussing music or art in general. We all know – or at least we believe we know – what is meant by terms like "western", "science fiction", "thriller", "novel", "tragedy", "opera" or "rock'n'roll". But while these designations don't pose any problems in everyday language, they are very hard to come by on an analytical level. Most moviegoers have a clear idea what kind of movie they can expect when they buy a ticket for the latest science fiction flick, but once we try to pin down precisely which elements actually constitute science fiction, the object of investigation soon crumbles between our fingers.

The basic problem is that genres are by no means clearly defined entities that remain stable over time. They are rather fluid and always subject to change. For example, a western produced in the 1920s differs greatly from a typical western from the 50s or the 70s. Genres are constantly being transformed and mixed; 'pure' examples which exclusively contain elements of one single genre are not the norm but a rare exception. Finally, genre names are not used uniformly. Different groups mean different things when they talk about genres. A sci-fi aficionado has a very different understanding of his favorite genre than someone who doesn't care about Luke Skywalker and co.

What this means is that a genre is not an inherent quality of a specific work but rather a label people use when they talk about films or books. And as language usage varies among different groups and over time, so do the meanings of genre designations. Genres are constant subjects to *regenrefication* as Altman (2000) calls the process. A telling example is the case of the melodrama which completely changed its meaning over the years. As Steve Neale has shown, until 1960 the trade press used "melodrama" for "male" pictures which focused on "action, adventure, and thrills" (Neale 1993, 69). It was only later that, led by feminist film theory, the meaning of melodrama was completely reversed. Today, the term "melodrama" designates "women's films" which are concerned with "pathos, romance, domesticity, the familial, and the 'feminine'" (ibid., 67; cf. Altman 2000, 70–77).

In its beginnings in the early 1970s, genre theory, often guided by the structuralist belief that any kind of human activity can be defined as a set of binary oppositions, tried to conceive of genres as clear cut systematics. These early approaches were almost exclusively concerned with the "film text"; genre was considered a feature of the film itself which could be detected by textual analysis. But since genres do not form Platonic entities floating outside of time but are, quite the contrary, at their very core historical and mutable, ultimately any systematic approach is doomed to fail.

Over the years and also partly due to the formation of a branch of media studies which does not solely focus on the text but also on how media are produced and consumed, genre theory has seen a shift from text-based analysis towards an approach which asks how genres are "used".◂3 To take into account both the textual features of a genre and the way it is handled by different agents, Altman (2000) suggests a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach. While semantic elements encompass a genre's "building blocks" like typical characters, props and settings, the syntax describes the relation between these elements, basically the structure of the plot. Altman's model seeks to unite both textual and historical, and/or discursive analysis. One may criticize that Altman just stuffs all aspects which are not part of the film itself into a vague and all too broad category called "pragmatics"; Johnston also notes that Altman concentrates on the role of the industry and has "little sense of the audience's place in genre definition" (2011, 165). Nonetheless, Altman's three-way approach serves as a good reminder that genre theory has to deal with both sides – the films themselves and how they are handled. Taken seriously, this means that genre theory must ultimately end up as genre history. To adapt a phrase from Nelson Goodman, when analyzing a genre, the question should not be "what is genre?" but rather "when is genre?".

When Is Mystery?

As a genre name "mystery" is relatively new to the German language and does not appear before the mid-nineties. To study its beginnings as a discrete genre I went through the archives of a variety of German newspapers and tried to determine the exact moment when "mystery" was first used in the contemporary sense. While I was not able to pin down with absolute certainty the moment when mystery arrived in German, the available sources still provide a quite clear picture: the emergence of mystery is without any doubt closely linked to the launch of one single TV series: THE X-FILES (1993–2002).

The X-Files was first aired in Germany on September 5, 1994 by private TV station ProSieben. I have not been able to find out whether ProSieben marketed X-Files as "mystery" right from the beginning. When I contacted ProSieben about this, they couldn't answer my questions since no one from that period worked there anymore and going through the archives would have meant too much work for them. Still, the newspaper articles provide ample data.

So far, I couldn't locate any articles referring to this new brand of mystery immediately following the launch of The X-Files in September 1994. In fact, there are very few references to the genre in its "non-English" sense up until the end of 1996. The earliest instance I could find is a clipping from the TV guide *TV Today* from September 2, 1995 announcing the second series of The X-Files which did start on September 7 ([Anonymous] 1995). Here, the series' genre is already identified as "mystery". In 1996, a meanwhile defunct magazine called *Space View* published a special edition dedicated to The X-Files. The magazine's cover page not only promises "complete background information and all the facts about the third season [of The X-Files]" but also news about "other mystery series: Invaders (1967–1968), The Nowhere Man (1995–1996), Dark Skies (1996-1997), The Prisoner (1967–1968)". In daily newspapers however there is hardly any reference to mystery in 1996. But things change the following year and suddenly the term is picked up everywhere; by October 1997 an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* – a newspaper which so far has mentioned "mystery" only four times, in all instances during the course of 1997 – even derisively notes that there seem to "more mystery shows than medical dramas on German television" (Allmaier 1997b). The same pattern can be observed in various other newspapers: before 1997 "mystery" is basically non-existent, but in 1997 many already refer to it as something commonly known which doesn't need further explanation. By then, mystery is even called a fad or a hype which will soon reach or has just surpassed its climax. In early April, Titus Arnu discusses "the mystery trend" (1997) in a rather long article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and two months later, on June 18, a short note in *Horizont* talks about the launch of a new magazine which supposedly tries to "ride the mystery wave" (he 1997, 10). The magazine's title is quite telling: *Faktor X* (especially considering that The X-Files is called Akte X in Germany). Many articles explicitly make the connection between mystery and Chris Carter's TV series; Michael Allmeier calls "The X-Files the unrivaled model for all new mystery series" (1997a) in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in May 1997.

Whether ProSieben used the mystery label right from the start when they launched The X-Files or whether they introduced it later to promote the show,

they were in any case very effective in tying together the success of the series and the newly created genre with their own image as a TV station. ProSieben was considered to be *the* mystery channel. An interview with Marko Tomazin, who was at that time the marketing manager of the competing TV station Sat 1, is very telling in this regard. In late 1997, Sat 1 staged a huge campaign to advertise Millenium (1996–1999), a new series by Chris Carter which they marketed as mystery.

> Would ProSieben have needed less advertising to promote a new mystery series? Yes. Since they can attract interested viewers through their existing mystery shows. If you can advertise your new show in the surroundings of The X-Files, you have the bigger part of your target audience neatly covered (Niggemeier 1997).

Even the competition confirms the tight connection between ProSieben, The X-Files and the mystery genre, and ProSieben was quite determined to profit from this image and tried to milk the new label. They established a program slot called "Mystery Montag" (Mystery Monday) which besides The X-Files would feature shows like Dark Skies (1996–1997), Outer Limits (1995–2002) and Fringe (2008–).◂4 This "Mystery Montag" label has been in use on and off until today. The station also launched a short-lived "mystery talk show" called Talk X in 1997 and later, from 2006 until 2009, a spin-off to their "science show" Galileo titled Galileo Mystery. The earliest reference to Talk X I could find is from September 1996 (wei 1996), almost exactly two years after the launch of The X-Files. The short article which clearly ridicules the concept of Talk X also makes a tongue-in-cheek remark on the term mystery: "in English the whole thing sounds even more mysterious" (ibid.). The fact that the article makes fun of the term "mystery" indicates that is must be quite new at that moment, but still not something entirely unknown. The text also makes a direct reference to The X-Files. All in all, the article suggests that ProSieben must have used the label mystery quite early if not right from the very start of the series.

If further proof was needed that genres are not some kind of ideal entity forever ingrained in a film but are rather discursive objects created and modeled by – amongst others – industrial players and market forces, the genesis of the mystery genre in the German speaking world serves as the perfect illustration. In two years – or maybe even less – mystery, which was entirely the creation of ProSieben, has turned into a household name with The X-Files serving as paradigmatic example.

Altman notes that "[r]ewriting film history is one of the fundamental rhetorical strategies accompanying regenrefication" (2000, 80), and indeed this tendency can be clearly observed in the case of the mystery genre. The series The X-Files is

compared to most often during its first years is Twin Peaks (1990–1991). Quite soon, Twin Peaks was labeled as mystery more or less uniformly even though the term didn't even exist when the show was first aired in September 1991. The article on the mystery genre in the German Wikipedia even lists an ancient show like The Twilight Zone (1959–1964) as a typical mystery series (wikipedia.de). To illustrate that the rewriting of history can also cross the boundaries between different types of media I want to point out an anthology called *Akte Mystery: Unheimliche Geschichten* (The Mystery Files: Uncanny Stories) published in 2008 which contains, amongst others, short stories by Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov and Wilhelm Hauff (Sarkowicz/Bunk 2008).

(Neo-)mythical Yearning

Genres are often perceived as being constituted of a core, a small cluster of supposedly undisputed essential films (which, of course, also changes over time). In the case of the mystery genre this uncontested core currently consists of The X-Files and Lost with Twin Peaks serving as important predecessor. Interestingly enough, these three series are also often mentioned together in English speaking discourse even though they are not considered to be part of the same genre. Many articles dealing with Lost (especially when discussing generic aspects) refer to The X-Files and/or Twin Peaks. Lynnette R. Porter and David Lavery, for example, claim that "Twin Peaks would count as a Lost ancestral text even if it hadn't figured prominently in the thinking of both the network executives and show creators who put Lost on the air in the fall of 2004" (2010, 90) and later also state that Lost "does replicate Files-ish traits" (ibid., 94).

If the three shows belong together, is there a fascination or feeling which unites them? Many commentators identify what can be called a common "mystery mood", the sensation of uncertainty, of not really understanding what is going on. Understood as a mirror of political and social changes in the Western world, the intricate conspiracies and intrigues of The X-Files and Lost et al. are often seen as "a prime expression of the uncertainty regarding the world's political future which emerged after the end of the Cold War" (Beil et al. 2012, 210).

In this perspective, the emergence of the mystery genre can also be understood as a playful form of what theologian Linus Hauser calls "neo-myths of the modern age" (cf. Hauser 2005 and 2009). According to Hauser, all myths deal with humanity's yearning to annihilate its own mortality. Neo-myths share the same anxiety as their source, but their form is emphatically modern, since they are informed by the scientific and technological revolutions of the modern age. Among the many examples of neo-myths analyzed by Hauser are such diverse phenomena as mesmerism, theosophy, neopaganism, Transcendental Meditation as wells as UFO cults and science fiction sects like Scientology.

The mystery genre, which Hauser regards as a "nonbinding form" of a neo-myth (Hauser 2005, 22) features characteristics which separate it from other neo-mythical manifestations: it never provides a definite or non-ambiguous answer. For Hauser, who is otherwise very critical of "neo-mythical reason", it is essential that Mulder and Scully are never able to fully solve a case. "Something always remains unknown, unsolved, uncertain" (Hauser 1998, 60). This sentiment is echoed by Dietmar Dath who, coming from a completely different background, counters the criticism that Lost has failed to come up with a satisfactory ending which succeeds in tying up all loose ends: "if nothing else this story [Lost] wants to cast out certain desires for answers; it demands riddles not to be solved but to be postponed for better ones" (Dath 2012, 50).

For both Hauser and Dath, mystery's typical lack of closure (which I will deal with later in more detail) is something ultimately positive. Hauser even sees The X-Files' success as evidence of "an intelligent audience which isn't deluded by simple truths and rejects banal black-and-white thinking" (Hauser 1998, 60). As we will see, not everyone agrees on this, but for the moment, it's not necessary to take sides in this debate. Let it just be put to record that the issue of closure – or lack thereof – seems to be an important aspect of mystery.

The Mysterious Three

One might argue that mystery is not a *real* genre but simply "a marketing strategy devised by advertising agencies" (Reiter 2007, 141), a name "obviously chosen for its smooth sound and its two sexy 'y'" (ibid., 140), with the goal to later link new productions to a show's success. What this critique ignores is that it is by no means unusual to create a new genre to sell a film or a TV show. And the fact remains that there is a widespread feeling of Twin Peaks, The X-Files and Lost somehow belonging together; a sentiment which is definitely not the invention of a single TV station but rather shared by many fans and academics. This is even true for Anglo-American research, even though here the three shows are not considered to belong to the same genre. The discussion rather focuses on their very hybridity. This leads to an interesting situation: three shows which for one segment of the audience form the core of a discrete

genre are typical examples of post-modern genre mixing in the eyes of other viewers.

Even though mystery in the German sense does not exist in the English speaking world, there seems to be a kind of generic awareness when it comes to these three shows. So if we concur that there is a genre called mystery, we can identify both a specific effect on its viewers – disorientation, the question of closure – and a structural quality – the mixing of genres. This leads to an obvious question: is the typical mystery mood, the feeling of disorientation, a result of the genre's hybrid structure?

David Lavery analyzes the genre of Lost under a telling title: *The Island's Greatest Mystery. Is Lost Science Fiction?* (2008). The question put forward by Lavery is not just an exercise in taxonomy but is central to Lost's possible solutions, since fantasy and science fiction are not "simple" genres which merely designate a set of semantic and syntactic elements, but rather stand for different fictional modes. They both allow for fictional worlds in which "impossible" things may happen. The main difference between the two is the way these impossibilities are justified – even if only superficially. While science fiction alludes to a techno-scientific worldview ◂**5** (and is therefore particularly suited to accommodate neo-myths),◂**6** fantasy's explanations are non-rational.◂**7** So the decision between supernatural fantasy and science fiction has fundamental consequences for the story because the two genres also stand for opposing logics, differing world orders which are to a certain degree mutually exclusive.◂**8**

Lavery who writes his article at the end of season three is still undecided whether the series can be justly called science fiction, since its many mysteries could have either a fantasy or a science fiction explanation: "Each of these enigmas could find a home in a science fiction narrative, but [...] it is by no means clear, yet, if we can label Lost as such" (2008, 295). Angela Ndalianis follows a similar line of reasoning and sees Lost as a hybrid which mixes the "spy thriller, drama, romance, science fiction (SF) and supernatural conventions" (2009, 182) and also "draws on a supernatural, fantasy and horror heritage" (ibid., 183). Using Altman's model Ndalianis identifies several central semantic elements which are typically characteristic of science fiction (ibid., 184f.). Still, these semantic elements don't suffice in turning the show as a whole into science fiction since their status is constantly put into question.

> The collision between religious belief systems that require leaps of faith versus unwavering conviction in the rationality of science as found in SF TV shows like Stargate SG-1 (1997–2007), Farscape (1999–2003), Andromeda (2000-2005), Battlestar Galactica (2004–2009) and The X-Files (which is itself a horror/SF/comedy/drama hybrid) is also present in Lost. Most dramatically, Mr Eko's faith in a higher, mystical force and Locke's obsessive worship of the 'power' of the Island stands in sharp contrast to the rationality of characters like Jack, Sawyer and Kate. This conflict is played out to the max in the apocalyptic narrative that threatens to destroy humankind and whose mystical and supernatural properties are being countered (supposedly) by the Dharma Initiative's maniacal belief in the outcomes of science and technology. (ibid., 185)

It is of course neither a coincidence nor a flaw that Lavery and Ndalianis are both unable to tell for sure which genre Lost belongs to. The dichotomy between faith and rationality described by Ndalianis is not only a dichotomy of generic affiliations – it also structures the plot. And of course, the tension between faith and rationality that Lost's characters have to face is exactly what Hauser calls the "metaphysical challenges of the modern era". Jack, Locke, Mr Eko – and with them the viewers – permanently have to cope "with contingency and the search for more" (Pöhlmann 2004, 4).◂**9**

As Ndalianis shows, Lost's mixing of different semantic elements also made the show much more suited for transmedia storytelling since the various tie-ins could concentrate on fleshing out specific generic viewpoints. The fans were encouraged to follow the different paths across a variety of media and given the impression that they could take an active part in the story (Ndalianis 2009, 191). In other words, the activities of the forensic fandom were in no small part fueled by Lost's hybrid qualities.

The Truth Is Out There

If we accept the idea that mystery is defined by the ambiguity of its world construction, by the viewer's inability to tell what logic governs the fictional realm, another genre concept immediately comes to mind: Tzvetan Todorov's famous (or to some: notorious) definition of the fantastic. According to Todorov, the fantastic (which mustn't be confused with what is commonly called "fantasy") is defined by the reader's hesitation to decide how an unbelievable event can be explained.

> The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (Todorov 1975, 25)

The "fantastic in its pure state" (ibid., 44), which is characterized by this hesitation, is located right in the middle of two neighboring genres, the *uncanny* (things can be explained rationally) and the *marvelous* (the laws of the fictional world differ from ours). A lot has been written about this definition, much of it critical – often for good reasons. But I don't intend to discuss Todorov's theory in detail but mainly bring it up because of its structural similarities with mystery as it is exemplified in Lost (and to a lesser degree in Twin Peaks and The X-Files).

Both mystery and the fantastic are characterized by the reader's hesitation to decide how certain events can be explained, but there is also an obvious difference. In the case of the fantastic the decision is between a "realistic" (uncanny) and an "unrealistic" (marvelous) resolution, while in the case of Lost the two possibilities to choose from – science fiction or supernatural fantasy – are both located inside the marvelous.◂10 Though the creators of Lost have repeatedly said that the story is "happening in the real world" (Damon Lindelof, quoted in Lostpedia, "Debunked theories"), this assessment seems rather odd. There certainly was a strong push from ABC to downplay the "strange" aspects of Lost (which partly was a reaction to the problems Twin Peaks and The X-Files faced when they became too weird and lost their audience), but from a certain point into the story, a marvelous solution seems virtually unavoidable. Opinions do probably differ on when exactly this line was crossed, but while strange events like a polar bear on the island or Locke's sudden cure might still have rational explanations, time traveling or the resurrection of dead characters is definitely too much to stomach.

On the other hand, one might also argue that a (pseudo-)rational science fiction solution becomes more and more unlikely as the show progresses. Put simply, Lost moves from the fantastic where a realistic solution still seems possible to a state where the decision is between fantasy and science fiction up to a point where only supernatural mumbo-jumbo can provide at least a hint of closure.◂11 Again, if we compare this to Todorov's fantastic, we see a common characteristic: the elusive quality of this structure. Like mystery's ambiguity, the fantastic "may evaporate at any moment" (Todorov 1975, 41) and transform into one of its adjacent genres. In fact, one of the most common points of criticism Todorov has to face is that hardly any examples of the pure fantastic exist.

Like Lost, Twin Peaks and The X-Files display a fantastic-like ambiguity, at least to some degree. In the case of David Lynch's and Mark Frost's pioneering show, this ambiguity is personified in the main character of Dale B. Cooper who is both a highly intelligent master detective in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes, and a man with a strong mystical side. Still, Twin Peaks is without any doubt the least undecided of the three. Although there is a hint towards extra-terrestrial activities – and therefore towards science fiction – at one point, by the time Laura Palmer's murderer is identified as a demon possessing human beings, the verdict is out.

In The X-Files the opposing approaches are incarnated in the characters of Mulder and Scully. He's a believer in the paranormal while she's a skeptic only trusting in science (as Ndalianis notes this strategy can also be observed in Lost, albeit with more characters involved). Still, the situation is more complex, since The X-Files features two different kinds of episodes: on the one hand, there are installments which together build an overall story arc dealing with alien abduction and conspiracy theories. While Scully (and the viewers) may at first be skeptical about Mulder's obsession, there also is a certain moment when the existence of aliens is no longer put into doubt.

The self-contained "monster of the week" episodes, which actually make up the majority of all episodes, work differently. Here, the answer whether the crime at hand has a realistic or marvelous explanation is usually given at the end of each installment. A typical example is the episode Quagmire (S03E22, 1996): Mulder and Scully are called to investigate a missing person's case. Mulder soon suspects that a legendary Loch Ness-like creature called Big Blue is responsible. In the course of their investigation, the two agents are even attacked by an unidentified object swimming in the lake, but finally the mysterious creature turns out, much to Mulder's disappointment, to be a simple alligator. At the end of the episode, the two have one last look at the lake, and as they turn away, Big Blue dives up and down in the water unnoticed.

It is instructive to compare the two types of episodes, because they're actually structured the same way, the difference being one of scale: there's a mystery, opposing explanations are offered and in the end, more often than not, a supernatural explanation is given. In one instance this structure is just played out in a single self-contained episode, while in the case of the overall story arc it is stretched across several seasons. The typical monster of the week episode might get boring over time since it mainly offers variations of one basic pattern; still, this type of episode more or less "works" by and in itself. Things get messy when the same structure is stretched out almost indefinitely. In fact, I would argue that all three series have to some degree failed in maintaining the delicate balance between opposing explanations over a longer period of time. Not surprising, considering Todorov's difficulties in providing examples of the pure fantastic.

Mythological Tinkering

Much of the three shows' attraction lies in the pleasure viewers derive from trying to combine the many details into a coherent picture. Unlike the typical whodunit they are not so much about identifying the culprit – not even in the case of the murder of Laura Palmer – but rather about trying to understand how everything connects, to unravel the underlying mythology. "Mythology", the idea that there is some kind of coherent system underlying everything, is a central concept for all three series (the English Wikipedia even has an entry for "Mythology of Lost"). There are, of course, many other fictional universes which have developed their own mythology – just think of Star Trek or Tolkien's Middle-Earth. What's special about mystery is that the world's mythology is basically unknown at the beginning, and that the plot is mainly structured as an unraveling of this hidden mythology (which is one reason why conspiracy theories feature so prominently). As Verena Schmöller observes:

> In contrast to other TV series Lost keeps its viewers in the dark how its fictional world functions and only reveals it gradually or rather season by season. [...] Still, from the very first season this fictional world is presupposed, or rather it is only through the reconstruction of the fictional universe – which can only happen retrospectively – that we are able to understand the series. Though the fictional universe [...] is supposed to exist all the time, it can only be reconstructed bit by bit, and in its entirety and all his inner workings only from the very end of Lost – and not even then completely (2011, 32)

"The truth is out there" – The X-Files' famous tag line would work equally for Twin Peaks and Lost. One, if not the, central fascination of all three series is to discover this "truth", to unravel the mythology, to find out "what is actually going on". Or to rephrase for our purpose: "What genre are we in?" As Ndalianis puts it:

> The viewer is persistently taunted with semantic blocks of information that can belong to horror, drama, reality TV or SF, but often the actual relationship between the semantic and syntactic elements are denied for weeks on end – or (God forbid!) until the series' concluding episodes. (2009, 186)

The hybrid nature of Lost and its constant postponing of a resolution also help the series to serve as a playful neo-myth in Hauser's sense. Referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss, Hauser distinguishes between two approaches of interpreting the world: While the *engineer* who represents the scientific mind relies on specific materials and instruments to follow a pre-defined plan, the *bricoleur* – viz. mythical thought – makes use of all the ingredients and tools he randomly comes across. "He [the bricoleur] interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 18). The bricoleur depends entirely on the things he has collected.

> To him his materials and tools are 'signs' for potential work relying exactly on what is available [...] For him, his collection is the 'sign' for every possible bricolage; in it he possesses the complete horizon of what can be constructed and he has no distance to this sign. (Hauser 2005, 18)

This description of mythical thought exhibits striking parallels to the activities of the forensic fan who also has to rely on a 'treasury' of collected factoids which all have the potential to function as signs pointing towards the big hidden mythology. Although most Lost fans probably do not understand "mythology" in Lévi-Strauss's sense, the term does seem very apt if we think of a mystery series like Lost as a kind of playful neo-myth. The ongoing unraveling of the island's true nature, "the assumed sense of purposefulness that seems embedded in the narrative design" (Mittell 2009, 127) and the constant flow of new bits of information perfectly match the fan's collecting and tinkering sensibilities.◂12 Every tiny bit of information, be it part of the TV show proper or of one of the many tie-ins, is potentially meaningful. The true fan does indeed "work [...] by means of signs" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 20).

But Is It Any Good?

In his article *Lost in a Great Story* Jason Mittell makes a plea for evaluative criticism in television studies, arguing that television scholars shouldn't disguise their own tastes and aesthetic judgments but rather be open about them (Mittell 2009, esp. 119–124). While it may just be a coincidence that Mittell chooses Lost as an example to illustrate his point, he is not alone in linking traditional scholarly analysis of the series with a value judgment. The question of what Lost tried to achieve on a narrative and formal level is often tied to an assessment of whether the show should be considered a failure or success in artistic terms. The bone of contention is again the issue of closure: does the lack of a coherent ending which ties up all loose ends indicate that the screenwriters simply had no clue what they were up to or is this open-endedness in fact what Lost et al. are all about?

For Mittell, "the show's purposefulness and appeal to the aesthetic value of unity" (Mittell 2009, 128) is one of Lost's big merits; writing his article after the end of season three he (still?) has a – note the almost religious vocabulary – "sense of faith in its narrative design and purpose" (ibid., 127). Therefore his verdict is clear: "Lost is a great television programme" (ibid., 119). While Mittell applauds the show's – assumed – unity, Dietmar Dath and Linus Hauser both argue that it is actually the absence of a definitive answer, the very lack of unity, which makes mystery interesting.◂13 Seen from this perspective, what many viewers may call inconsistency or incoherence appears as a conscious artistic and even epistemological strategy. Mystery is the genre of our times because it refuses to provide easy answers.

From the more prosaic point of view of a TV network there is, of course, a vested interest in prolonging a successful show as long as possible. According to this reasoning the constant delay of a final resolution simply follows the inherent logic of a weekly show which must always come up with new reasons to entice viewers to watch the next episode. The endless delay of an answer also makes extensions into other media more attractive. The drawback is that it puts the shows' creators into a dilemma since they permanently have to come up with new puzzles even though the central ambiguity – realistic, science fiction or fantasy explanation – will almost certainly dissolve sooner or later. So they have to invent new riddles and at the same time continue to give the impression that there actually is a full-fledged mythology which is capable of answering all open questions. In the case of Lost there are also the show's creators who have not only announced the ending of the show three years in advance but have repeatedly stated that they will deliver a satisfying solution.

Although Dietmar Dath pleads that Lost's indecisiveness be regarded as its major quality, it's not without irony that he himself in passing presents a solution "which encompasses all others explanations of the island" (Dath 2012, 46). In the end, the taunting just seems too strong and even a strong proponent of open-endedness finally ends up as a forensic fan trying to complete the vast bricolage of the show's mythology.

Notes

I have to thank Daniela (Ahabs_Daughter) from xfiles-mania.de and Robert Blanchet who helped me tremendously with my research for this article.

01► Eschke/Bohne for example state that "the best known example of a mystery series is Lost" (2010, 105). This and all further translations from German sources have been done by the author.

02► The only study I'm aware of which deals with mystery in the German sense is Waldkirch (2007); this masters thesis is only concerned with literature and shows very little understanding of the complexities of genre theory.

03► In some cases, the pendulum has even completely swung the other way. For example, Lobato/Ryan (2011) suggest that genres are by no means the property of a film but are instead heavily modeled by and do depend on mechanisms of distribution.

04► I was not able to determine with absolute certainty when the concept of "Mystery Montag" was introduced. Since the time slot for The X-Files was moved around several times during the first four seasons and was only permanently set to Monday in September 1998 with the beginning of season 5, I suspect that "Mystery Montag" was not introduced earlier.

05► In many cases the alleged scientific accuracy of science fiction is just a rhetorical strategy. By relying on a techno-scientific iconography, science fiction implicitly claims that its *nova*, its marvelous elements, are in accord with the world as we know it. But whether this is actually true, whether inventions like travel faster than the speed of light or time machines are scientifically sound, is quite unimportant. Rather it is essential for the viewers to recognize that these gadgets are machines and that they therefore immediately understand that they are watching a science fiction film (cf. Spiegel 2007, esp. 42–56, and Spiegel 2008).

06► Hauser is particularly interested in science fiction because he wants to emphasize "the importance of science-based technology for the new religiousness" (Hauser 2009, 327). But as he notes his concept of the neo-myth can also be applied to fantasy in the tradition of J. R. R. Tolkien (also cf. Kölzer 2008).

07► Fantasy as a genre name has a double meaning. Often it is used for "heroic fantasy" in the tradition of J. R. R. Tolkien, which takes place in a 'secondary world' populated by fairy-tale characters. This is of course not the kind of fantasy I'm talking about. Here, fantasy means stories taking place in a setting which looks like our everyday world but which is "enhanced" by additional "impossible" elements. Impossible elements which can't be rationalized (pseudo-)scientifically.

08► There are of course many examples of what is often called "science fantasy", a blend of typical elements of both genres. The most prominent example is probably the Star Wars saga which on one hand features typical science fiction elements like starships and robots, but also sports fantasy ingredients like the Force and an order of warrior monks who fight with lightsabers. Still, in most cases the two genres can be clearly separated by the way they justify their impossible elements.

09► For a detailed discussion of Todorov's theory cf. Spiegel (2010) and Durst (2007).

10► Dath (2012) follows a very similar line of reasoning and referring to Todorov and SF critic John Clute sees in Lost "a unique balancing between the two central categories of the *bound fantastic* and the *free fantastic*" (Dath 2012, 60).

11► I am by no means suggesting that a science fiction solution would somehow be inherently better or more rewarding than one relying on fantasy. The explanation that the crash of Oceanic 815 was caused by an electromagnetic shockwave is equally mumbo-jumbo, just in a science fiction guise. The disappointment many viewers experienced as the show progressed is ultimately neither a question of genre nor realism. It is rather caused by a lack of coherence, a feeling of arbitrariness and – again – a lack of closure.

12► Hauser does introduce a third category, the *Krauterer*, a dialect expression which can be roughly translated as "chaotic and quirky tinkerer". Like the bricoleur, the krauterer collects bits and pieces which could form a myth, but unlike the bricoleur he does not take the next step and actually construct a coherent mythology. For Hauser, many people today live as krauterers: they may be practicing Christians but are nonetheless interested in esoteric themes, attend spiritual workshops or assemble healing stones in their walls, however all of these activities remain noncommittal (cf. Hauser 2005, 18f.). The forensic fan is definitely not a krauterer since he is very much committed to the cause of building a mythology.

13► It's important to note that Hauser only talks about The X-Files, while Dath, who is himself a writer (and very prominent advocate) of science fiction never mentions the term "mystery" in his booklet on Lost.

14► According to Dath, the island is "*a white hole*, stabilized by some sort of matter with negative energy density, which produces information instead of annihilating it and which therefore can influence vital functions, which after all are substantially based on *bio-computing*" (Dath 2012, 45f.). Frankly, I have no idea what this is supposed to mean.

References

Allmeier, Michael (1997a) Sie sind irgendwo da draußen. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 31, 1997, p. 34.

Allmeier, Michael (1997b) Das ist mein Fluch. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, October 11, 1997, p. 36.

Altman, Rick (2000) Film/Genre [1999]. London: BFI Publishing.

[Anonymous] (1995) Akte X – Die unheimlichen Fälle des FBI. In: TV Today, September 2, 1995.

Arnu, Titus (1997) Der Mystery-Trend. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung. April 3, 1997, p. 19.

Beil, Benjamin et al. (2012) Die Fernsehserie als Reflexion und Projektion des medialen Wandels. In: Mediatisierte Welten. Forschungsfelder und Beschreibungsansätze. Ed. By Friedrich Krotz & Andreas Hepp.Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 197-223.

Dath, Dietmar (2012) Lost. Zürich: Diaphanes.

Durst, Uwe (2007) Theorie der phantastischen Literatur [2001] (Updated and expanded edition). Berlin: Lit.

Eschke, Gunther/Bohne, Rudolf (2010) Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien. Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.

Hauser, Linus (1998) "Möge die Macht mit Dir sein!" Science-fiction und Religion. Frankfurt a. M.: Gemeinschaftswerk der Evangelischen Publizistik.

Hauser, Linus (2005) Kritik der neomythischen Vernunft. Vol. 1: Menschen als Götter der Erde (1800–1945) [2004] (Updated and corrected edition). Paderborn: Schöningh.

Hauser, Linus (2009) Kritik der neomythischen Vernunft. Vol. 2: Neomythen der beruhigten Endlichkeit: Die Zeit ab 1945. Paderborn: Schöningh.

he (1997) *Faktor X* setzt auf Markt für paranormale Phaenomene. In: Horizont, June 5, 1997, p. 10.

Johnston, Keith M. (2011) Science Fiction Film. A Critical Introduction. Oxford/New York: Berg.

Kölzer, Christian (2008) "Fairy tales are more than true". Das mythische und neomythische Weltdeutungspotential der Fantasy am Beispiel von J. R. R. Tolkiens Lord of the Rings und Philip Pullmans His Dark Materials. Trier: WVT.

Lavery, David (2008) The Island's Greatest Mystery. Is Lost Science Fiction? In: The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader. Ed. by J. P. Telotte. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, pp. 283–245.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1966) The Savage Mind [1962]. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lobato, Ramon/Ryan, Mark David (2011) Rethinking Genre Studies Through Distribution Analysis: Issues in International Horror Movie Circuits. In: New Review of Film and Television Studies 9, 2, pp. 188-203. DOI:10.1080/17400309.2011.556944.

Lostpedia Debunked theories. Online: [http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Debunked_theories]; accessed on: May, 31, 2013.

Ndalianis, Angela (2009) Lost in Genre: Chasing the White Rabbit to Find a White Polar Bear. In: Reading Lost. Perspectives on a Hit Television Show. Ed. by Roberta Pearson. London/New York: I. B. Tauris, pp. 181–197.

Niggemeier, Stefan (1997) "Zeit, Nerven und Geld". Sat-1-Werber Marko Tomazin über die Serie Millennium. Süddeutsche Zeitung. November 21, 1997, p. 16.

Pöhlmann, Matthias (2004) Vorwort. In: EZW-Texte 177, pp. 3f.

Porter, Lynnette R./Lavery, David (2010) Lost's Buried Treasures. The Unofficial Guide to Everything Lost Fans Need to Know [2007] (3rd edition). Naperville: Sourcebooks.

Reiter, Ralf (2007) Angeknabbert! Die Science Fiction zwischen Mystery, Mainstream und Gegenwartsliteratur. In: Das Science Fiction Jahr 2007. Ed by Sascha Mamczak & Wolfgang Jeschke. München: Heyne, pp. 139–161.

Sarkowicz, Hans/Bunk, Carolin (eds.) (2008) Akte Mystery: Unheimliche Geschichten.

Schmöller, Verena (2011) Further Instructions. Zum seriellen Erzählen in Lost. In: Durch das Labyrinth von Lost. Die US-Fernsehserie aus kultur- und medienwissenschaftlicher Perspektive. Ed. by Verne Schmöller & Marion Kühn. Marburg: Schüren, pp. 19-41.

Space View (1996) Special Edition 3. "Die X Akten". Frankfurt a. M.: Insel Verlag.

Spiegel, Simon (2007) Die Konstitution des Wunderbaren. Zu einer Poetik des Science-Fiction-Films. Marburg: Schüren.

Spiegel, Simon (2008) Things Made Strange. On the Concept of "Estrangement" in Science Fiction Theory. In: Science Fiction Studies. 35.3, 106, pp. 369-385.

Spiegel, Simon (2010) Theoretisch phantastisch. Eine Einführung in Tzvetan Todorov's Theorie der phantastischen Literatur. Murnau am Staffelsee: p.machinery.

Todorov, Tzvetan (1975) The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre [1970]. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Waldkirch, Nina (2007) Der Trend zum Mystery-Genre in neuen Romanen und Filmadaptionen. Dan Brown, Arturo Pérez-Reverte und Wolfgang Hohlbein. Marburg: Tectum Verlag.

wei (1996) Rätselhaftes Geplauder. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung. September 24, 1996, p. 17.

Wikipedia.de Mystery. Online: [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mystery]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Wikipedia.org Mythology of Lost. Online: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythology_of_Lost]; accessed on May 20, 2014.

Michael Cuntz

Lighthouse Transmissions – Lost Prisoners, the *topos* of Distant Suffering and the Agency of the Island

Beyond any doubt, recent TV series play an eminent role in the ongoing transformation (Spigel and Olsson 2004) and even relocation ◂1 of TV in a convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) that is most of all an audio-visual multi-screen culture (Casetti 2007). However, the ABC network series Lost could be regarded as particularly Janus-faced, operating and being operative as well within a classical mode of TV programming and without it, via reception of the series on DVD and cross-media marketing strategies. I would argue that Lost, despite its undeniable cinematic production values, ◂2 still reflects intensely upon TV.

Therefore, the purpose of my paper is not simply to explore some intertextual and inter-medial threads among others in Lost – Verne's *L'île mystérieuse* and, more importantly, The Prisoner (1967–1968) –, nor is it to arbitrarily pick out an aspect on the thematic level of Lost that just aroused my curiosity – Jacob's lighthouse. What I am interested in doing, on the one hand, is assembling fragments of a genealogy, throughout a series of works of fiction, which, beyond their belonging to a medium, a genre and even beyond the distinction between the fictional and the factual, deal with a relational structure, a twofold topology of the ambivalent spectatorship and discursive witnessing of distant suffering (Boltanski 2007) that oscillates between compassion and voyeuristic pleasure. ◂3 This double topology, developed in the novel, the pamphlet, and the press, had existed long before television, but, after TV acquired, with audiovisual live transmission fulfilling both the promise of and the demand for an immediate coverage of events, the status formerly held by newspapers and the radio, it has been linked to this medium as the one embodying most fully the paradox of tele-"presence" at least for half a century, before it might have started to lose this status to the internet in the 21st century: (horrible) things happening to persons (in distress) appearing before our eyes (and ears), persons at once present and absent, distant and close at the same time, claiming for a spontaneous, helping intervention that the distant spectator is unable to make. This goes along with a focus on either benevolent or malevolent forces that intervene in favour of, or to the detriment of the persons in plight. To this constellation, both TV